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Angry British M.P.'s Charge Spy Scandal Is Played Down

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Special to The New York Times

LONDON, Oct. 25 — Angry members of Parliament accused the Government today of playing down the importance of a breach in security at a top-secret intelligence-gathering center in Britain.

The contentions were provoked by a report in The New York Times on Sunday that American officials were asking Britain for details of a security lapse described as "one of the longest and potentially most damaging Soviet penetrations of Western intelligence since World War II."

In July, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher acknowledged that a man identified as Geoffrey Arthur Prime had been charged with violating the Official Secrets Act but she took pains to minimize the importance of the breach in security.

Donald Anderson, a member of the opposition Labor Party who questioned Mrs. Thatcher, said today that it seemed she had been "less than frank." The Prime Minister, he said, "should be brought before the House to account for" a possible "cover-up and an attempt to hide the true facts."

Mr. Anderson submitted a written question today to Mrs. Thatcher, to which the Prime Minister must reply by Thursday.

"The obvious reason for asking the question is the considerable disquiet felt by the United States Government,"

he said. The Labor M.P. was reflecting the widely expressed embarrassment here that the seriousness of the security breach would be exposed by Washington.

"The alarming thing about the latest scare inside the British security services is the frequency with which the Americans perceive us as the main source of leaks from within the Atlantic alliance," The Daily Mail said in an editorial today. "We have a long way to go before the Americans will really trust us again."

The British news accounts included many of the details that had been published in the United States. But none of them could mention Mr. Prime's name because of strict British contempt of court laws.

The International Herald Tribune, which is jointly owned by The New York Times Company, The Washington Post and the Whitney Communications Corporation, published the account written by The Guardian, which similarly omitted use of Mr. Prime's name.

British Law Is Tightened

To be safe, some of the British reports also omitted references to the Government Communications Headquarters at Cheltenham where Mr. Prime worked as a Russian translator for nine years. Other accounts discussed freely what little is known about the facility, which employs an estimated 10,000 people processing material from around the world. Some quoted former employees of the communications headquarters who were critical of security lapses.

Under British criminal law, which has been tightened significantly in recent years, the press may not print anything about the accused before trial, except for the bare facts of the arrest and the charging.

Nor was Mr. Prime's name mentioned in Parliament today or in any other public forum. Replying to a ques-

tion, Sir Michael Havers, the Attorney General, mentioned "the story to which you refer is based on an article in an American newspaper, which names a person against whom I have authorized proceedings under Section 1 of the Official Secrets Act of 1911."

However, British law would not have prevented the Government here from disclosing information to the United States Government, which has been upset at the lack of information it has received from Britain.

The British provisions are intended to insure a fair trial, although the defendant can waive the restrictions on press reporting. Mr. Prime, whose trial on espionage charges is due to begin shortly, has not done so.

5 Papers Face Prosecution

"That case is sub judice and it would not be right to have further public discussion until the trial is completed," Sir Michael told the House of Commons today.

In other cases, British law enforcement officials have been diligent about maintaining these restrictions. Just two weeks ago, Sir Michael announced that five major British newspapers would be prosecuted for contempt of court because of their articles about Michael Fagan, the Buckingham Palace intruder.

In the case of the "Yorkshire Ripper," the most celebrated recent criminal case in Britain, the press was similarly precluded from identifying Peter Sutcliffe, who was initially arrested on only one murder charge, as the Ripper. But the press stretched the law to its limits in announcing the arrest and in disclosing details about Mr. Sutcliffe's background.

Libel Laws Are Strict

The British Government has another method of restricting publication called the D-Notice, a form of voluntary censorship agreed upon by the Government and the newspaper proprietors during a war scare in 1912.

The guidelines, which almost always apply to military matters, were used

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